

NEWS

From Dirt to the Dinner Table: One CED's Project

by Corinna Hernandez, Student Intern, Michigan State FSA Office

Last spring, 160 third-graders in Michigan learned how to make dirt, thanks to Tim Stein, Iosco County CED. Stein volunteered to help a local elementary school set up a program to teach kids about composting, farming, and Michigan field crops. The program is part of Michigan's continuing "Ag in the Classroom" venture, helping children understand and appreciate the value of agriculture and conservation.

In May, Stein brought two busloads of children to a composting area and showed them how to turn leaves, garbage, and waste into soil with a composting machine. "They were all so surprised that they couldn't tell the difference between composted soil and soil from the ground," says Stein. "I think it made a big impression on them."



Tim Stein explains composting.

Photos by Theresa DeLage

Robin Tubbs, a teacher, says her students enjoyed the field trip's hands-on learning. "Tim had all the different stages of soil set up to show them," says Tubbs. "It was a fun day, and I think the kids loved the big machinery." Tubbs also used the experience as a tie-in to lessons on math and science. The children learned about chemical changes and how to graph soil temperature.

Stein will continue volunteering for the school this fall. He is planning to set up a compost row outside the classroom. The children will tend the row by taking daily compost temperatures, watching for changes in the soil, and observing when the compost pile is turned. This way, they will have a first-hand look at conservation at work.

See DIRT, continued on page 3



ADMINISTRATOR'S COLUMN

Climate Survey Results — Better Late Than Never

Well, it's finally finished: the "organizational climate survey" we administered to all County and Federal employees from September through October 1997.

I'm aware that initially many of you thought it was just another exercise in futility. In reality, it was anything but. In fact, over 65 percent of our employees took time to respond to this survey. The priority shown by all of you on these important issues is to be commended!

The primary purpose of the survey was to assess employee perceptions regarding unfair treatment in the promotion and hiring practices of FSA managers. Its eventual goal was to develop conclusions and recommendations to improve the way we do business and treat our employees. That's the kind of information we can't afford to do without.

Once the information was gathered, there was still a great deal that remained to be done. The information had to be collated and analyzed outside the Agency — FSA does not have the authority or the ability to conduct

such a survey on its own — and at every step we had a lot of bureaucratic red tape to negotiate and many unforeseen delays. But we kept riding herd on it, and at last we have the results.

Just as I promised, I'm sharing those results with you. They reveal much that's encouraging about the work environment in FSA, but also show us areas in which we need to improve. Here's what we learned:

- FSA employees told us that they think that barriers to advancement are minimal in the Agency. They also believed that when and if barriers do occur, management does take steps to do something about them.
- Among County employees, minority racial groups progressed just as far in their administrative and grade levels as whites did. However, one-half of African American County employees reported hitting career road blocks.
- Among Federal employees, white employees had slightly (though not significantly) higher representations at supervisory and managerial levels than other racial groups. Nevertheless, with respect to perceptions, almost one-half of Federal employees overall (70 percent African American) reported hitting career road blocks.
- Many employees expected downsizing or RIF-related job changes within the next two years.
- Female employees were less positive than male employees in their perceptions of FSA's awards, Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) and discipline systems, and the existence of preferential treatment.
- Employees overall felt that African-American males and females had made the most progress moving into top-level positions. However, African-American employees reported being denied for promo-

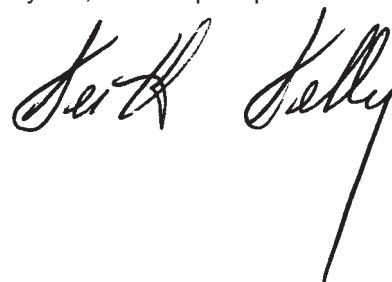
tions because of discrimination more than other employee groups.

- Employees cited sex, race, and age discrimination in applying for promotional opportunities as being most prevalent problems at FSA.
- Few employees who felt discriminated against chose to file an EEO complaint, due to fears of retaliation, fairness, and the effort required.
- Most employees believed that training was effective and available, and expressed a need for additional employee and supervisory training. The majority of employees received some EEO-related training in the past 12 months.

I want to apologize to all of you for our delay in letting you know where we are in this process. During the next several weeks, the Civil Rights & Small Business Utilization Staff will review the survey, and report back to me with an analysis and recommendations for corrective actions. I have instructed them to make this project a top priority. You have my pledge: we take seriously the concerns and issues you have raised, and we will address them in the very near future.

The "can-do" spirit of our field employees is spurring me on. Our state and local people have been going the extra mile under tough conditions, and the Secretary and I are taking our cue from you. We'll make good on our commitments, as you have made good on yours.

And while we're at it, we salute all of you for your terrific work. Thanks to everyone, and keep it up!



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After about eight weeks, the compost pile will become fertile soil. Stein says he will help the students plant the soil in window boxes for them to grow wheat, corn, carrots, and other produce. Stein will explain more about the types of crops grown in Michigan and how climate and weather patterns are crucial to farmers. He hopes to convey the importance of farming to Michigan's economy and how urban and rural communities can work together to protect and conserve our land and its resources.

Stein refers to his project as "From Dirt to the Dinner Table," and he is excited about how it can involve children. "I think this will teach them a lot about the contribution of agriculture. It is also an excellent way for FSA to extend good will and help the community. That's what we're here for."

Thank you, Tim, not only for your valuable contribution to the community, but also for conveying the importance of agriculture and conservation to our next generation.

Iosco County's Compost Turner

Iosco County FSA staff worked with local municipalities and the District Soil Conservation Board to purchase a compost turner for local farmers and towns to use. FSA staff there stress that composting is an excellent way for cities to dispose of leaves and grass clippings, and farmers to dispose of animal waste. The compost machine takes only eight weeks to turn waste into fertile soil — it takes an average of seven years without it. How does the machine work so quickly? Compost needs oxygen to decompose, so the turning or mixing that the machine does adds air which speeds up the process.

A Way of Life for a Beginning Rice Farmer

by Dave Widlund, Farm Loan Manager, Glenn County, California

At age 21, Kevin Jarrett is well on his way to achieving his life's goal as a rice farmer.

It's not surprising that Jarrett has long dreamed of success with rice considering it's been his family's bread and butter for three generations. In 1917, Jarrett's grandfather planted his first crop in Woodland, Calif. Then, in the 1950s, it was on to Williams, Calif. where the family has farmed rice ever since. Jarrett's father alone has more than 40 years experience in the field. And for Jarrett, this has translated into countless hours of operating a tractor and harvester, irrigating, maintaining and repairing farm equipment, and other assorted farm jobs.

Four years ago Jarrett felt comfortable enough with his experience and knowledge to branch out on his own. He knew, however, that bank financing was unlikely since he was just starting out and had limited resources. So he sought help from the Glenn County FSA Office. His beginning-farmer loan helped with annual operating ex-

penses, and the office also provided financial supervision. In particular, Jarrett says, Farm Loan Officer Michele Larrick has been instrumental in helping him along the way.

Jarrett's business has paid off with strong yields — 77 sacks of rice in 1994, 75 in 1995, and 71 in 1996. Last year his yield climbed to 80 sacks. Jarrett feels he now has the experience and working capital to apply for a commercial bank loan. With Larrick's assistance, he plans to graduate to commercial credit with FSA's guaranteed loan program. Larrick will help Jarrett prepare the necessary financial information and submit it to agricultural lenders in the area, noting that FSA will guarantee the loan.

To Jarrett, "Farming is fun, but also a lot of hard work." He believes that along with his perseverance, the guidance from his family and FSA have been crucial to his success. "FSA is a great way to get your feet wet," he says. "And with the supervised credit, if I should fall, I won't fall too far."



Photo by Michele Larrick

While busy with his family farm, throughout high school Jarrett also actively participated in FFA. Through FFA and his own rice farm operation, he developed a keen interest in agricultural mechanics. He has restored several antique tractors and shown his work at county fairs and tractor shows around the state. For his work, FFA awarded Jarrett the American Farmer Degree last year. Pictured is Jarrett with one of his restored tractors.

Building Fences, Naturally

by Linda Stuckenbroker, CED, Watonwan, Minnesota

Jerry and Mollie Sill are ready for this coming winter. The newly planted 1.6 acre living snow fence on their Madelia, Minn. property will be a strong competitor against Mother Nature's toughest storms.

The project got its start in December 1997, with Linda Stuckenbroker, FSA's Watonwan CED. During that winter, Minnesota tackled record snowfall and severe winds, and the state spent \$100 million above normal for snow removal on state roads. Of that, counties and townships absorbed half the cost.

In particular, an intersection near the Sill's farm was heavily hit by snow and ice. It was the site of numerous accidents, and the snow and ice removal was costly. So the Sills were happy to cooperate when Stuckenbroker approached them about resolving the problem by planting a natural snow/windbreak.

A combined force of county, state, and Federal parties — with Watonwan County FSA as the lead agency — developed the project and combined funding to minimize cost to the Sills. The Sills enrolled the land where the field windbreak was planted into the Conservation Reserve Program, the primary source of funds. They receive annual rental payments for 15 years, cost-share assistance for establishing the trees, and an annual payment from the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT). MnDOT also paid 50 percent of the cost of the trees, which were sold wholesale from Watonwan County's 4-H Federation. The cities of Madelia and Saint James donated wood chips for mulch, the Watonwan County Soil and Water Conservation District donated labor and the use of their tree planter, and the County Commissioners offered a county property tax break for the acres planted with trees.



Photo by Saint James Plain Dealer
Volunteers hard at work on the snow fence.

The project culminated on April 22nd's Earth Day, with volunteers from FSA, the Boy Scouts, FFA, 4H, and other local, state, and Federal entities coming together to help out. They planted and mulched two rows of common purple lilac bushes and eastern red cedar trees. Amy Neigum, NRCS District Conservationist, says, "It was fun to get so many people and different organizations involved in conservation." Stuckenbroker believes, "The most important partner in all of this was the landowner. Without the Sills' willingness to enroll, the entire project would have failed."

The Sills have been involved in farming all of their lives and conservation is important to them. They also feel good about contributing to public safety at two highway junctures. The snow fence will enhance access to town by reducing windspeed for improved driver visibility and trapping snow to prevent it from blowing and drifting.

The fence will increase crop yields since it keeps moisture and topsoil from blowing away. Other benefits include continuous cash rental payments, county tax incentives, enhanced appearance of roadsides and communities, and increased wildlife habitat. "The benefits of this program go far beyond just landowner compensation," says Gary Wyatt, Watonwan Extension Service Educator.

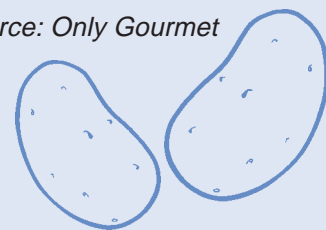
This was only one of many similar projects for Watonwan County. Local officials, working with county and state agencies to identify problem sites throughout the area, have so far selected 18 state highways for improvement. Stuckenbroker notes that four additional sites were planted last spring under the same program, and they're working on more for next year.

George Welk, MnDOT, says that states, counties, and townships will save thousands of dollars on highway repair with these partnership programs. "With a little creativity and cooperation, it can happen. It shows people that 'government' can and does do good things."

FOOD FACT:

The potato has long been the first choice of NASA scientists trying to devise ways to grow food for astronauts. NASA focuses on the potato because of its appeal to most tastes, its abundance of nutrients and slow release energy, its lack of waste and its ease of preparation.

—Source: *Only Gourmet*



Missouri: Intent on Outreach

by Christine Zeigler, CC, Missouri State Office

The dictionary defines outreach as: "The extending of services or activities beyond current or usual limits." The FSA Missouri state and county offices are doing just that as they work toward fulfilling FSA's goal of reaching everyone who may benefit from our programs.

On May 11, Missouri FSA, Rural Development (RD), and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) held a joint USDA Managers and Partners Meeting to discuss long-range civil rights plans. The meeting, held in Jefferson City, Mo., focused on developing innovative methods to assist county offices in their outreach efforts. Other meeting participants included "USDA Partners," such as the Missouri Department of Agriculture, Missouri Department of Conservation, University Extension Service, and Lincoln University. Participants agreed on the following seven areas of outreach upon which they will focus their attention:

- Identify limited resource and minority producers, landowners, and communities. Ensure that they have access to current FSA materials.



USDA Managers and Partners Meeting participants: (left to right) Max Sell, FSA; Larry Knehans, RD; Richard Gonnerman, FSA; Terry Cosby, NRCS & Chairperson of the Cultural Diversity Committee.

Photo by Mary Stubbs

- Coordinate multiagency tours and meetings to make programs more accessible to small and non-traditional farming operations and potential homeowners.
- Increase female and minority membership on agency committees, boards, and councils.
- Identify a monitoring and reporting system to assess effectiveness of statewide outreach activities, accomplishments, and clients served.
- Identify ways to better equip employees to serve nontraditional customers.
- Develop nontraditional ways to reach out to limited resource and small farmers with farm loan programs.
- Develop nontraditional ways to reach out to under served communities.

All agreed this was an auspicious step in USDA's and Missouri's outreach mission.

USDA Service Center Hammered by Hail

by Donald Dunn, CED, Warren/Edmonson County, Kentucky

On the afternoon of April 16, a severe hail storm hit the USDA Service Center in Bowling Green, Ky. Grapefruit-sized hail and rain pummeled the two buildings, causing leaks and parts of the ceilings and roofs to collapse. The complex was damaged extensively, but fortunately, there were no injuries.

In fact, 5.3 inches of rainfall fell in a 24-hour period, most within six hours of the storm. And, though the storm and the tornado that followed lasted only ten minutes, total damage to the county climbed to over \$520 million.

FSA, Rural Development, and Natural Resources Conservation Service employees in the USDA complex reacted quickly to minimize losses and additional damage to equipment, furniture, and records. "No one could imagine what a mess this place was," says Barbara Kincheloe, FSA Program Technician. Within three hours of the storm, employees had loaded computer equipment inside a rental truck. Volunteers, including farmers and a retired CED and her husband, came to assist.

Since so many homes and businesses suffered damage, USDA employees had trouble locating plastic or tarpaulins to cover furniture and files. Farmers Larry Hays and Robert Donoho saved the day by donating plastic used for tobacco production from their farms.

By April 27, employees had the Service Center up and running in a temporary location four miles away, after being down for only six days and moving their entire office. Services resumed quickly. Since the move, the FSA staff has processed over 2,500



USDA Service Center takes a beating.

Photo by Fred Alcott

tobacco leases, mailed out 3,000 tract letters, sent out payments to over 1,600 farms in AMTA, completed over 200 reconstitutions, and have accepted many crop acreage reports. They've accomplished all of this while also making the preparations for the move back.

NRCS Area Office employees were able to remain in one of the complex's buildings since the damage was not as bad there, but have weathered through with bare concrete floors and no ceilings in some areas. Total damage to the office complex was

approximately \$225,000. But, thanks to employees' quick thinking and response, the only equipment destroyed was a ten-year-old calculator and a few pieces of laminated furniture. Total damage estimates to furniture and equipment came in at less than \$300 and no doors or windows in either building were broken. Vehicles, however, weren't so lucky — 17 employee and 13 NRCS vehicles were either damaged or destroyed. And, eight employees suffered damage to their homes.

Employees expect to move back into their familiar digs in mid-October, after the completion of complex renovation and remodeling. What do the FSA employees there think of all the excitement? "I hope we never go through it again," says Barbara Whitley, Program Technician.

FOOD FACT:

White eggs are just as nutritious as brown ones. The shell's color is a characteristic of the breed of the chicken. It has nothing to do with the nutritional value.

—Source: *The Food Files*

Women's Agricultural Conference

The second International Conference on Women in Agriculture took place June 28 through July 2, 1998 in Washington, D.C. Over 1,000 women attended the event, sponsored by the President's Interagency Council on Women and hosted by USDA.

The conference focused on the status of women in agricultural economies in the U.S. and abroad, and the effects on agriculture of rural policies. Women from all walks of life in agriculture met their peers, networked with experts, exchanged views with policymakers, and examined outreach opportunities for rural

women. The attendees gained practical training on creating new opportunities and raising awareness of women's contributions to rural development and production agriculture.

Approximately 30 FSA personnel attended, including two from Nebraska. Ruth Lech, the Nebraska State FSA Committee Chairperson, says, "The meeting underscored the strength of women in agriculture. We are not taking a back seat anymore — we are informed and our input can help. I hope to see the conferences continue with even larger turnouts."

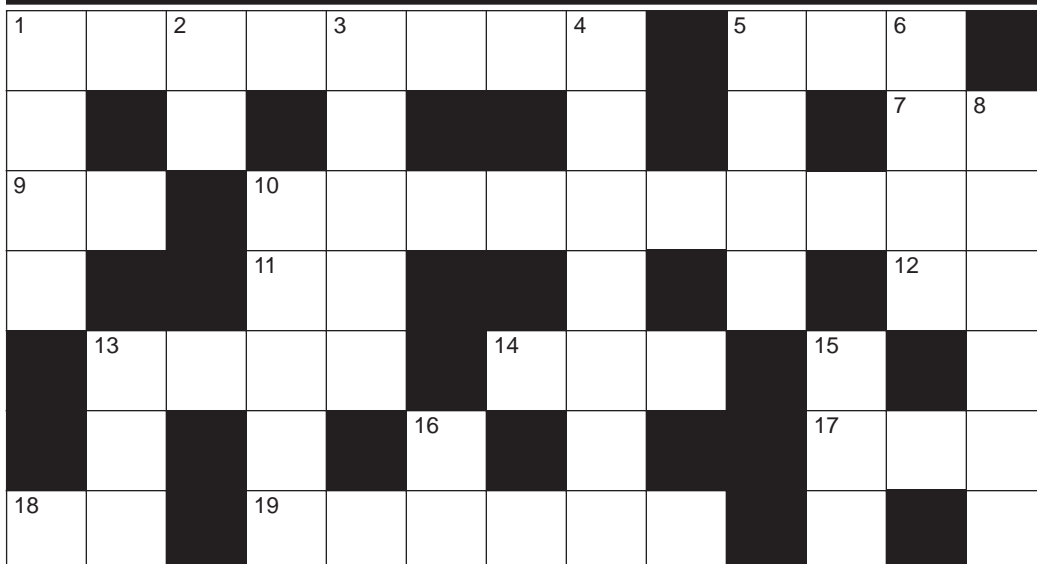
Susan Frazier, a Nebraska State FSA committee member, says, "The conference helped me recognize that many of the problems we face in U.S. agriculture also occur worldwide. For instance, a universal concern is receiving a price for what we produce that is enough for a family to live on." She also points out that it was helpful to discuss common concerns with other FSA employees. "The Freedom to Farm Act and reduced staffing levels with increased workload were hot topics," she says.

Both women enjoyed the global unity among all of the attendees.



Front row: Ruth Lech
Back row: Susan Frazier

OCTOBER FSA CROSSWORD



FOOD FACT:

There are about 400 varieties of bananas. All belong to the same family of lilies and orchids.

—Source: *The Food Files*



ACROSS

1. It makes brown sugar brown
5. "Don't have a _____"
7. This state produces the most fresh eggs for consumption
9. Keith Kel____, FSA's leader
10. State with the highest net income from its sale of crops
11. State famous for pineapples and macadamia nuts
12. KS and _____ produce about one-third of the Nation's wheat
13. It can make or break a crop
14. FSA program providing hope for wildlife
17. USDA agency that lights up rural America
18. Eddie Moo____, strategic planner
19. _____ Joy

DOWN

1. Popular mustache in ads
2. "Crawfish" is this state's state dish
3. This country is the world's largest olive oil producer
4. This spice is made from dried crocus flowers
5. This grain can be found in fireworks, paint, and crayons
6. A large heavy farm wagon
8. A colorful root that's good in salads
10. The U.S. exports the biggest share of its pistachios to this country
13. A cereal grass that's also a bio-fuel used to produce energy
15. USDA agency that keeps a cockroach house
16. FSA farm loan disaster program, abbrev.

CALENDAR OF UPCOMING EVENTS

Date	Location	Event
Month of October		National Disability Employment Awareness Month
October 4-6	Richmond, Va.	Vicki Hicks, Deputy Administrator for Commodity Operations, to attend eighth annual Executive Leadership Conference
October 6	Washington, D.C.	National Disability Employment Awareness Month Opening Ceremony
October 6-7	Washington, D.C.	Interagency Disability Awareness Educational Showcase Technology Expo
October 13-15	Kansas City, Mo.	Vicki Hicks to attend Export Food Aid Conference
October 15	Kansas City, Mo.	Managers Disability Awareness Day
October 16	Davis, Calif.	Deputy Secretary Rominger and Administrator Kelly to attend USDA Service Center grand opening

Note: The above is subject to change.